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Returning Army engineer pleased Iraqi engineers hired five years ago still on reconstruction team. . .

By Norris Jones
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FEST-A team members visit a renovated school in 2003. Most schools in southern Iraq showed years of neglect so the renovations normally included window and door repair, new lights, bathroom fixtures and painting. Darrow's six-person FEST-A team started 170 projects, including 49 schools, during four months in 2003. [USACE Photo]

CAMP KALSU, Iraq – He was among the first helping rebuild key facilities in southern Iraq shortly after Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled.

This month, Lt. Col. Michael Darrow returned to Iraq on another U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers mission. This time he will be the Officer-in-Charge of the Forat Area Office overseeing 42 construction projects valued at \$140 million in Babil, Karbala, Najaf, Al Qadisiyah and Wasit.



Lt. Col. Michael Darrow [USACE Photo]

His staff -- 48 Iraqi engineers, 12 U.S. government civilians and 12 military -- is responsible for a variety of essential service improvements in cities throughout that region including water treatment, sewers, schools, medical facilities and road paving.

He said the situation is definitely different compared to his assignment five years ago when he came in with a six-person Forward Engineer Support Team -- Advance (FEST-A). "When we arrived, our first assignment was making assessments and immediate renovations to get key ministry facilities back up and functioning. We were responsible for projects in Iraq's four southern provinces of Basrah, Dhi Qar, Maysan and Al Muthanna," he explained.

"We knew we needed help and one of our first initiatives was hiring 16 Iraqi engineers, all who originally were associated

with the Ministry of Housing and Construction. Those individuals were a significant value-added asset. They had an extensive knowledge of the local market and tradesmen, their technical competence especially in the electrical and mechanical fields enhanced our capabilities and they were able to visit the projects every day even as the security requirements for Coalition forces changed," he said.

When his six-person team left in October 2003, about 170 projects worth \$14.5 million "were somewhere in the process, some in the initial assessment, others being contracted out and some already completed. We were asked to renovate 49 schools, 24 ministry offices, 14 security and justice facilities, five fire stations, seven hospitals, six banks, five bridges and seven industrial complexes.

"It was an amazing amount of work and we couldn't have gotten nearly as far as we did without those 16 Iraqi engineer associates being part of the team." What is especially gratifying to Darrow is that when he returned to Iraq this year, he met one of those Iraqi engineers and learned that they were still working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in essentially the same role.

"I'm very happy to see that those individuals are still part of the team, making a difference as Iraq moves forward," he said.

Lt. Col. Darrow deployed from the USACE Norfolk District where he is the deputy commander. He and his wife Dana have three children and will be celebrating their 20th year of marriage in October.

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